Frank O'Hara

I Do This I Do That

Third Saturday Poesy Cafe

Tom Corrado

Thumbnail

Frank O'Hara was smart. Funny. Passionate. Seductive. Irreverent. And fun. He knew tons about tons but didn't lord it over you. He made you feel welcome. He made you feel important. He made you feel as if the poem had been written just for you. He wrote about what he saw but what he saw was not what you or I would see. Kind of like what Van Gogh saw when he looked at sunflowers. And he wrote all the time. In the moment. About all kinds of things. He didn't sweat the small stuff, or, for that matter, the not-so-small stuff. For him, everything was fair game. Everything was subject matter. For him, Life was good! And he wanted everyone to feel that way. Like Miles Davis, he was way cool, he went on his nerve, he did not fret mistakes. For him, like Miles, there were no mistakes. His exuberance was contagious! His poems? Odes to joy! Reading them, I feel good.

Why Frank O'Hara?

Frank O'Hara embodied Whitman's *I celebrate myself.* He lived life to the fullest, pedal-to-the-metal. He did everything to excess. He was smart, funny, friendly, charming, enthusiastic, energetic, engaging, stimulating, generous, sociable, warm, passionate, gregarious, indefatigable, and irreverent. He captivated everyone. He had many friends. He was the center of attention. Being an artist, a poet, was the most natural thing in the world for him. He gave the impression of taking neither himself nor his art that seriously.

He was raised in the middle of nowhere, couldn't wait to leave, and found solace in movies. He loved them, and would get lost in them. They would remain a passion all his life.

As would art. A serious student of art, he made art by himself and with his artist friends, produced art criticism, articles, interviews, catalogue essays, and books, mostly positive commentaries, exuberant in praise, and associative in logic. He subscribed to Baudelaire's notion that the *best criticism is that which is entertaining and poetic,* and for this was taken to task or ignored by other *serious* critics. Nonetheless, he rose through the ranks at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), moving from Assistant Curator to

Associate Curator to Full Curator, and became a major player, on an official level, in the rise of American painting in the nineteen-fifties (Acocella, 1993).

As for poetry, he was always running lines - at work, on his walks through the city, at parties, lectures, readings - capturing, documenting, memorializing his experiences, in the moment, the lines waiting to be realized through pencil, pen, or typewriter. Everything he wrote about either happened to him or he felt it happened to him. He loved to write poetry, and did so daily, stuffing books, envelopes, drawers, shopping bags, and letters to friends with his output, often giving away only copies. He rarely submitted a poem for publication.

He also loved to work with others, popularizing the art of collaboration, an activity little practiced in America at the time, but one that would catch on in the 1960s and 1970s. He wrote poems with John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Bill Berkson; created translations from the French; produced a series of lithographs with Larry Rivers, collages with Michael Goldberg, comic strips with Joe Brainard, *Dialogues for Two Voices and Two Pianos* with composer Ned Rorem, and a movie with painter Alfred Leslie.

And he loved to drink! He drank heavily and hard, had trouble sleeping because of nightmares, and woke up hung over more often than not. Yet, he was amazingly productive. As his curatorial responsibilities at MoMA grew with his promotions, however, he drank more and more and wrote less and less:

By 1962, he was starting the day with a bourbon and orange juice, and he became a mean drunk. He had terrible hangovers, crying jags, fights with friends. In 1965, Joe LeSueur, the ex-lover who had shared his apartment and been his steady friend for nine years, moved out. . . . The poetry dried up. During his two years with Vincent Warren [a young dancer], from 1959 to 1961, he had written close to a hundred poems. In 1964, he wrote fourteen; in 1965, two. He was better known than ever before, and he still did his job at the museum very well, but many of his assignments were sad tasks: retrospectives of artists, like Franz Kline and

David Smith, who had meant the world to him and were now dead (Acocella, 1993 p. 78).

Life

Francis Russell "Frank" O'Hara was born in Baltimore in 1926, raised in Grafton, Massachusetts, attended St. John's High School in Shrewsbury, and studied piano at the New England Conservatory in Boston. He wanted to become a concert pianist. After serving in the Navy as a sonarman in the South Pacific from 1944 to 1946, he entered Harvard, where Edward Gorey was his roommate, majored in music, switched to English, received a B.A. in 1950, and, on the advice of John Ciardi, his creative writing teacher, entered graduate school at the University of Michigan, where he was awarded an M.A. in 1951. That same year he moved to New York, working briefly as private secretary to photographer Cecil Beaton before joining the staff of MoMA. Between 1953 and 1955 he worked as editorial associate for *Art News*, for which his friends John Ashbery and James Schuyler also wrote. In 1955, he rejoined the staff of MoMA, and in 1960, was appointed Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture. On July 25, 1966, at three in the morning, he was struck by a jeep on Fire Island Pines Beach and died the next day. He was buried in Green River Cemetery in Springs, Long Island. The funeral was mobbed.

Poetry

O'Hara wanted his space to be welcoming, vivid, and crowded. - Stephenie Burt

O'Hara's poems welcome you. Like Whitman and Frost, he invites you to join him, in his case, on his lunchtime strolls through New York City, as he casually points out this and that. Generally autobiographical, his poems are informed by his observations of and reactions to life in the city. His poetry is one of openness and intimacy. His poetic practice was a true democracy of attention: anything and everything was fair game. He didn't introspect or recollect. He dashed off poems about his life in situ. The key to his work is its commitment to experience as it occurs, immediate and unadulterated, in the moment - its deflation of pretense. He

didn't bother with rhyme or meter; he recorded what he saw, seeking to capture the immediacy of life, the sights, sounds, and smells of the city: *one feels the romance of cheap digs in Greenwich Village, chinos and sneakers, a constant flow of adrenaline, taxis, drinks, an opening at the Museum of Modern Art, a party at a painter's loft, poems written on the run between the San Remo bar and the New York City Ballet* (Lehman, 1998). The reader is seduced and carried along by the urgency of the poems as they traverse an elaborate network of cross-references to personal friends, artists, film stars, city streets, bars, exotic places, titles of books (Perloff, 1997). The (minor?) downside to this blizzard of proper nouns is that it can flatten unwary readers. Is it the poetry of an in-group? Yes and no. Though it is a poetry of what it feels like to be, and want to be, part of an in-group, or even at its center, we feel the excitement and the mental agility that allowed O'Hara to navigate the vast network, even though we may not know all its nodes (Burt, 2009).

O'Hara was a skilled and knowledgeable poet, well aware, if not always respectful, of the long tradition of his craft. His favorite poets were Arthur Rimbaud, Boris Pasternak, Stephane Mallarme, and Vladimir Mayakovski. He imitated Wallace Stevens (with a touch of Marianne Moore), explored post-Symbolist French poetry, especially that of Guillaume Apollinaire and later Pierre Reverdy, along with the bold surrealism of Vladimir Mayakovski. At the same time his innate *Americanness* was encouraged by writers such as William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore, together with the colloquial W. H. Auden, whom he felt to be an *American* poet in his use of the vernacular.

The offspring of this melding of post-Symbolist French tradition and the American idiom were some of the liveliest and most personable poems written in the 1950s and early 1960s. O'Hara incorporated Surrealistic and Dadaistic techniques within a colloquial speech and the flexible syntax of an engaging and democratic postmodernism. His special subject was the encounter of the active sensibility with the world about it through extravagant fantasy, a ready wit, and a detailed realism of feelings.

In the mid-fifties, William Carlos Williams, takes over, and

O'Hara begins regularly producing short, plainspoken poems about the world in front of his eyes: the ballet, the jazz clubs, the friends, the city. Very soon he masters the form, and we have a vision and a voice that are only O'Hara's:

It's my lunch hour, so I go
for a walk among the hum-colored
cabs. First, down the sidewalk
where laborers feed their dirty
glistening torsos sandwiches
and Coca-Cola. . . . (Acocella, 1993)

His poems may sometimes seem dashed-off - and many were. As Chaisson (2008) reminds us, *where most poets deposit words with an eyedropper, O'Hara sprayed them through a fire hose.* Because of this seeming casual method of composition, critics, early on, gave him short shrift, accusing him of dilettantism.

He got back at them in 1951 with this:

The Critic

I cannot possibly think of you
other than you are: the assassin

of my orchards. You lurk there
in the shadows, meting out

conversation like Eve's first
confusion between penises and

snakes. Oh be droll, be jolly
and be temperate! Do not

frighten me more than you
have to! I must live forever.

Eventually, critics and non-critics alike recognized his genius, and were won over by the sheer originality of his art, the colloquial air and ease of his lines, the fit and finish of his poems. In the introduction to the 1997 edition of her book *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, Marjorie

Perloff argues that *O'Hara's language in [his] mock-odes and elegies . . . has provided an important bridge to the language poetics of the 1980s and 1990s*, further arguing that O'Hara *devised linguistic structures that anticipate the poetics of our moment, from Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman and Kathleen Fraser down to Peter Gizzi and Kenneth Goldsmith, Cole Swenson and Susan Wheeler* (p. 29).

Once at the periphery of American poetry, regarded as an entertaining minor poet, O'Hara and his work are now recognized, established, and applauded in both free-verse and language communities.

I Do This I Do That

A Step Away from Them

It's my lunch hour, so I go
for a walk among the hum-colored
cabs. First, down the sidewalk
where laborers feed their dirty
glistening torsos sandwiches
and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
on. They protect them from falling
bricks, I guess. Then onto the
avenue where skirts are flipping
above heels and blow up over
grates. The sun is hot, but the
cabs stir up the air. I look
at bargains in wristwatches. There
are cats playing in sawdust.
On
to Times Square, where the sign
blows smoke over my head, and higher
the waterfall pours lightly. A
Negro stands in a doorway with a
toothpick, languorously agitating.
A blonde chorus girl clicks: he
smiles and rubs his chin. Everything
suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of
a Thursday.
Neon in daylight is a
great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would

write, as are light bulbs in daylight.
I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET'S
CORNER. Giulietta Masina, wife of
Federico Fellini, è bell' attrice.
And chocolate malted. A lady in
foxes on such a day puts her poodle
in a cab.
There are several Puerto
Ricans on the avenue today, which
makes it beautiful and warm. First
Bunny died, then John Latouche,
then Jackson Pollock. But is the
earth as full as life was full, of them?
And one has eaten and one walks,
past the magazines with nudes
and the posters for BULLFIGHT and
the Manhattan Storage Warehouse,
which they'll soon tear down. I
used to think they had the Armory
Show there.
A glass of papaya juice
and back to work. My heart is in my
pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy.

In 1956, with the publication of the poem, *A Step Away from Them*, O'Hara unveiled his signature method of attention and recording, later referred to as *I do this I do that,* which would hit full stride with the publication in 1964 of a small volume appropriately titled *Lunch Poems.* Reading them is not unlike having a conversation with a smart, engaging, charming guest.

The key to understanding O'Hara's conversational *I do this I do that* poems is in sensing the elegiac undertow that checks their forward progress. These are not list poems or simple hoppers jammed with bright, popping details; they are, instead, like Shakespeare's sonnets, little contraptions designed to stop, yet unable to stop, the passage of time. Their brisk syntax and jaunty prosody propel the reader forward, but the sights and sounds of the city distract the poet: a liver-sausage sandwich, the glistening torsos of workmen on their lunch hour, a display of ceramics by Miró, Christmas trees on Park Avenue, dogs in blankets,

cheeseburgers at Juliet's Corner, the Park Lane Liquor Store, the Five Spot, Birdland, the headline *Lana Turner Has Collapsed!* He wishes to linger longer, but is disallowed. The poems keep changing gears, speeding up and slowing down, caught between hurry and delay, designed to stop, yet unable to stop, the passing of time.

Personism: A Manifesto

You just go on your nerve! - Frank O'Hara

Witty, satirical, yet instructive, this two-page mock manifesto, reportedly written on a napkin in about an hour at the request of Donald Allen, who wanted a prose statement for his *New American* Poetry anthology (and who later rejected it as too frivolous), is ostensibly a peek under O'Hara's hood: how he wrote what he wrote and how to read what he wrote. Like his poetry, it is campy, witty, playful, seeded with references to friends and heroes and to what he was reading. It grew out of a love affair [probably with Vincent Warren (Lehman 1998)], and consisted of the smitten O'Hara's realization that love poems might not differ in intention, nor in effect, from phone calls:

I realized that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem. Poems, in other words, are only one kind of intimate communication, and ought to be at least as impressive, at least as personal perhaps, as the others. . . . I don't . . . like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, "Give it up!"

A Personist poem is a poem to one person. It creates a tone that involves *a powerful inclusivity and love.* It works by cajoling the reader into thinking what it would be like to meet the poet. It puts the poem between two people instead of on two pages, but, unlike confessional poetry, it makes the reader a nearly intimate equal, the poet's friend, not his or her therapist.

It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal

aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feelings toward the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person.

Personism then is both a manifesto and a parody of a manifesto, and if it seems to name a point of view which makes poems obsolete, it also names an aesthetic effect which only a few poets have been able to achieve.

Poet or Gay Poet?

During his lifetime, what O'Hara chose or was allowed to publish show not only what society was willing to accept but what O'Hara was willing to discuss. While O'Hara clearly indulged in writing graphic, up-front poems about gay life similar to contemporaries like Allen Ginsberg, these poems were not published during his lifetime in favor of more subtle poems about homosexuality such as *To the Harbormaster,* where meaning was subject to interpretation. This dividing line of obscure gay-themed poems during his lifetime and openly gay-themed poems after his death seems clear, yet most reviewers choose to ignore it. Instead, O'Hara is viewed as either a talented poet or a talented gay poet. The reality is that the poems published during his lifetime many times do not exhibit the gay qualities often ascribed to O'Hara but neither are they devoid of any subtle references either. The references are subtle for a reason, and whether this is a decided approach fostered by O'Hara or a repressed approach in an oppressive culture is a curious point that should be examined. What is important is understanding O'Hara's significance in representing his time in history and understanding his legacies to both the gay rights movement and to poetry. Of the two factions of critics being considered, the more difficult to examine are those who view O'Hara as simply a poet because they exclude any mention of his homosexuality. Some of these critics may simply wish to present O'Hara in an equal fashion with other poets, without categorizing him as gay, but to exclude not only a part of who he was as a person but also a part of the subject matter of his poetry is narrow-minded. O'Hara had many facets, and being gay was clearly a significant part of

who he was. To exclude this part of him is to fail to understand the man or his work in proper contexts. And to fail to acknowledge the more open, forward expression of his homosexuality in poems published after his death, even if the more subtle poems published during his lifetime are overlooked, seems a conscious decision based not in criticism but in prejudice (Cales, 2002).

Books (Poetry and Other)

1952 *A City Winter and Other Poems*
1953 *Oranges*
1957 *Meditations in an Emergency*
1959 *Jackson Pollock*
1960 *New Spanish Painting and Sculpture*
1960 *Odes*
1960 *Second Avenue*
1964 *Lunch Poems*
1965 *Love Poems*
1965 *Robert Motherwell*
1966 *Nakian*
1967 *In Memory of My Feelings: A Selection of Poems*
1969 *Two Pieces*
1971 *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*
1973 *Belgrade*
1974 *Hymns of St. Bridget*
1974 *The End of the Far West*
1974 *The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara*
1975 *Art Chronicles 1954-1966*
1975 *Standing Still and Walking in New York*
1977 *Early Writing*
1977 *Poems Retrieved*
1978 *Selected Plays*
1997 *Amorous Nightmares of Delay: Selected Plays*

Comments

His:

It may be that poetry makes life's nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial. Or each on specific

occasions, or both all the time.

Now I am quietly waiting for the catastrophe of my personality to seem beautiful again, and interesting, and modern.

I am mainly preoccupied with the world as I experience it.

There's nobody writing better poetry than I am.

What is happening to me, allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems. I don't think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else, they are just there in whatever form I can find them.

I hope the poem to "be" the subject, not just about it.

I don't ever want to grow old. I want to be like Shelley and Keats and die while I'm still young and beautiful.

I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life.

Oh god it's wonderful to get out of bed and drink too much coffee and smoke too many cigarettes and love you so much.

I am the least difficult of men. All I want is boundless love.

Nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them.

Only Whitman and Crane and Williams . . . are better than the movies.

[My mother] is one of the most mean, hypocritical, self-indulgent, selfish, and avaricious persons I have ever known well.

If I had my way I'd go on and on and on and never go to sleep.

When I die, don't come, I wouldn't want a leaf to turn away from the sun - it loves it there. There's nothing so spiritual about being happy but you can't miss a day of it, because it doesn't last.

Others:

I want to celebrate one aspect of O'Hara's work: its excited devotion to the state of excitement itself. Excitement, a quality separable from its objects and catalysts, was O'Hara's stock-in-trade; excitement seems a simple matter, although, like most visceral events (breathing, sleeping, eating, shitting), being excited can be broken down into a thousand parts, episodes that elude the taxonomist's grasp. - Koestenbaum

O'Hara had the ability, and power, to use in a poem whatever occurred to him at the moment, without reflection. . . . [His] is a poetry of nouns and pronouns; the verbs often doubtful, in quotes, adornments after the fact (for the names contain actions), or simply useful connectives, reduced to prepositions. . . . He wrote quickly, revised little but, as his manuscripts show, brilliantly. - Shapcott

Frank O'Hara was everybody's catalyst. - Edwin Denby, poet & dance critic

Compared to him, everyone else seemed a little self-conscious, abashed, or megalomaniacal. – Koch

He was Fred Astaire with the whole art community as his Ginger Rogers! - Morton Feldman, composer

When his work was featured in Donald Allen's groundbreaking 1960 anthology, *The New American Poetry,* O'Hara was primarily considered a minor poet, a mere writer of occasional poems, best known as a fixture of the New York art scene. By the 1990s, however, O'Hara was considered one of the major American poets of the century. His work is widely anthologized, and appears in such ultra-mainstream anthologies as A. Poulin's *Contemporary American Poetry* and J.D. McClatchy's *Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry.* It would be difficult to imagine that a college

student could leave an undergraduate course in 20th-century American poetry today without having been exposed to O'Hara's work. - Stewart

Gregarious and seemingly indefatiguable, O'Hara had what many artists lack - the capacity to enjoy the work of others - and he had it to the nth degree.... His natural pace was faster than anyone else's, and he left nothing of himself in reserve. He was the boy who refused to shut his eyes in bed. He may have been exhausted but would not have admitted it. ... O'Hara developed an elastic colloquial idiom in tune with the rhythms of his city life.... He liked the whole idea of occasional poetry, the idea that poems could be occasioned by circumstance. - Lehman

A democracy of attention ... is crucial to O'Hara's work. Nothing was thought unworthy of mention in a poem, and far from clutter the inclusiveness resulted in a congeries of high and low, new combinations of feeling, fresh perspectives on the familiar.... The drama of first impressions and second thoughts is gleefully played out in [O'Hara's] poems, giving them their air of improvisation.... With Walt Whitman and Hart Crane, O'Hara is the true celebrant of the fast forward of Manhattan life.... His death in a freak accident conferred on him a new sort of legend, not dissimilar to the one that enshrined one of O'Hara's own heroes, James Dean: the genius in the underworld of readers' imaginations, forever young and restless, the martyr of originality, an abiding force to drive the dreamy. ... He liked high art and low bars, indulged a carefree promiscuity and cultivated close friendships. He was smart and witty. His mind worked faster than others did: he was everywhere, adored by everyone, always smiling, a drink in hand, new poems in the typewriter. - McClatchy

He made an auspicious start as a poet. After nursing a failing novel through his first months of studying creative writing at the University of Michigan, he junked it, wrote ninety poems and two plays, and won a prize. If you write ninety poems in the course of a few months, you probably mean something different by the word *poem* from what most people mean. O'Hara didn't introspect or recollect much. His poems lacked the formal appliqué of rhyme and meter, and,

where most poets deposited words with an eyedropper, O'Hara sprayed them through a fire hose.... Someone with O'Hara's presence could afford to regard the writing of poetry as a secondary act, a transcript of personality. Transcripts aren't generally thought of as art in themselves, which may explain why O'Hara was so reckless with his poems once he got them down on paper, jamming them in his pockets or in random drawers. Who knows how many O'Hara poems have been lost?... People in the high-toned literary circles, the Partisan Review crowd, considered him weird or frivolous, and he considered them, in their suits and black dresses, cadavers before their time.... According to the gallery owner John Bernard Myers, who published O'Hara's first pamphlet of poems, *A City Winter* (with drawings by Larry Rivers), in 1952, the best supporters of Frank's poetry were always artists who liked to purchase a poetry pamphlet while visiting my gallery.... And yet the experiences that O'Hara had as a child and as a young man seemed to him anything but fictional: his father dying while he was at Harvard, his mother descending into an alcoholic spiral, his own sexual and artistic awakening stranding him without a past to which he could comfortably return. You can see O'Hara's entire oeuvre as an attempt, therefore, to remake identity on terms more durable than the ones to which he had been consigned. It is a giant counter-biography, full of alternative facts: films and paintings and music he loved, friends, lovers, idols.... O'Hara was essentially a self-elegist: poem after poem explores that darker sense of his "own ceaseless going" - his presence, a moment ago so real and vital, now going, now gone. *Like a piece of ice on a hot stove,* Robert Frost wrote, *the poem must ride on its own melting.* This is the story of every O'Hara poem, which simultaneously moves forward and disappears, delighting in its speed and despairing of its brevity.... [T]the real O'Hara was more complicated and more vital - more unpredictable, dashing, maddening, ambitious, and inspiring - than legend allows.... O'Hara was a sort of zigzag man, and the pleasures of reading Ford's edition of O'Hara are the pleasures of the zigzag. (*My quietness has a number of naked selves,* O'Hara insisted, elevating, as always, the protean over the stable.) He swerves toward autobiography, then away; he veers toward intimacy, then corrects toward abstraction. Reeling, he says, *I wish I weren't reeling at all.* He'll call a poem

Autobiographia Literaria, then flee from the trap of his title (a title already a parody, via Coleridge, of its own autobiographical promise). He likes games of hide-and-seek. He is *in a corner of the schoolyard / all alone,* or *behind a / tree,* crying out, *I am / an orphan.* (No child playing hide-and-seek can bear not to be found for long.) In *Autobiographia Literaria,* the game of hide-and-seek ends, as it often does, in the very poem we are reading: *And here I am, the center of all beauty! writing these poems! Imagine!* . . . And yet, and yet: it's hard to imagine O'Hara saying, as Wallace Stevens famously said, *a book of poems is a damned serious thing.* It's hard to imagine O'Hara saying, even, as William Carlos Williams said, that a mere poem felt like a bomb dropped on him. Part of the seriousness in O'Hara's approach (as with Lord Byron or W. H. Auden) involved making much of his poetry seem tossed-off, personable, the evidence of a personality you'd go out of your way to encounter. (That he did have such a personality seems almost too good to be true.) - Burt

I love Frank O'Hara. He's so funny, and not in a throwaway sense but by tripping you up every time you think you know where you're going. The disordered syntax, the images that seem to promise a depth and yet stop you before you can go further with them. The false connectives. . . . O'Hara loves New York the way people who aren't from New York love New York. It never stops being exotic to him. - Huntington

O'Hara was among the first American poets ever to write about the experience of living in apartments. - Chiasson

Unpretentiousness became the trademark of O'Hara's mature poetry. . . . He was everybody's catalyst. - Acocella

From the beginning O'Hara's poetry was engaged with the worlds of music, dance, and painting. In that complex of associations he devised an idea of poetic form that allowed the inclusion of many kinds of events, including everyday conversations and notes about New York advertising signs. . . . It was not until O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* was published in 1965 that his reputation gained ground and not until after his sudden death that his recognition increased. Now his reputation is secure as an important and even popular poet

in the great upsurge of American poetry following World War II. . . . He did not cultivate academic alliances or solicit editors and publishers. Painter John Button remarks: *When asked by a publisher-friend for a book, Frank might have trouble even finding the poems stuffed into kitchen drawers or packed in boxes that had not been unpacked since his last move. Frank's fame came to him unlooked-for.* His recognition came in part because of his early death, the somewhat absurd and meaningless occasion of that death (he was run down by a beach taxi on Fire Island), the prominence and loyalty of his friends, the renown of his own personality, and above all, the exuberant writings themselves. His casual attitude toward his poetic career is reminiscent of the casual composition of many of the poems themselves. One of his poems, *Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!),* for example, was written on the Staten Island Ferry en route to a poetry reading, and his most important statement of poetics, *Personism,* was written in less than an hour while Allen, who requested it, was on his way across town to pick it up. Koch touches upon this particular quality of O'Hara's genius -his naturalness: *Something Frank had that none of the other artists and writers I know had to the same degree was a way of feeling and acting as though being an artist were the most natural thing in the world. Compared to him everyone else seemed a little self-conscious, abashed, or megalomaniacal.* When this quality entered his verse, his work was formally inventive and most compelling. That *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* should turn out to be a volume of the present dimension will surprise those who knew him, and would have surprised Frank even more. Dashing the poems off at odd moments - in his office at The Museum of Modern Art, in the street at lunch time or even in a room full of people - he would then put them away in drawers and cartons and half forget them. Once when a publisher asked him for a manuscript he spent weeks and months combing the apartment, enthusiastic and bored at the same time, trying to assemble the poems. Finally he let the project drop . . . because his thoughts were elsewhere.
- poetryfoundation.org

Legacy

Frank O'Hara is a poetry heavyweight, *an American icon, a*

superstar. Books and articles, websites and blogs, plays and songs about him and about his poems continue to appear:

- on the 47th anniversary of his death - July 25, 2013 - *The New Republic* published a brief commentary on O'Hara

- the March/April 2013 *American Poetry Review* featured Alice Neel's painting of him on the cover and included selections from his *Meditations in an Emergency* along with an article on him by C. Dale Young

- in 2012, the American alternative rock band *Chelsea Light Moving* recorded *Frank O'Hara Hit,* a tribute to O'Hara's *liberating poetry for writers for an unending time*

- the pop culture eZine - *Airship* - for April 12, 2013 presented a Frank O'Hara quiz

- the Worcester County Poetry Association awards an annual Frank O'Hara Poetry Prize

- in the 2008 season premier of *Mad Men,* a man in a midtown Manhattan bar is shown reading O'Hara's *Meditations in an Emergency*

O'Hara's was a legacy of innovation. Poets continue to learn from and copy his complex wordplay: how to emulate the exhilaration of a life well-lived, how to capture the bustle of crowds, how to make poems that sound like cities, how to make words that acknowledge the accomplishments of abstract visual artists, how to *tell it like it is,* how to treat readers as near but not quite intimate equals, how to portray activities in the moment, how to observe something or someone and record it in a way that grabs and holds the reader. Without Frank O'Hara and his poems, our world would surely be a lesser place.

Read and recite these poems. Dance a little while you do. . . .
- Barbara Berman

Takeaway

Frank O'Hara was a towering original, a relentless

instigator and inveterate collaborator, a generous and trustworthy friend, an encouraging and supportive colleague, a champion and defender of the avant-garde.

And here I am, the
center of all beauty!
writing these poems!
Imagine!

Sources

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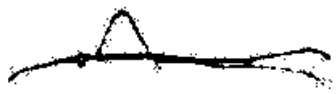

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